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CONSTRUCTIVISM AS THE FRAMEWORK

FOR INTERNATIONAL ORDERS

by

Charles Stretch, Major, USAF

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Instructor: Lt Col Hock Yong Anson Chiu, Republic of Singapore Air Force

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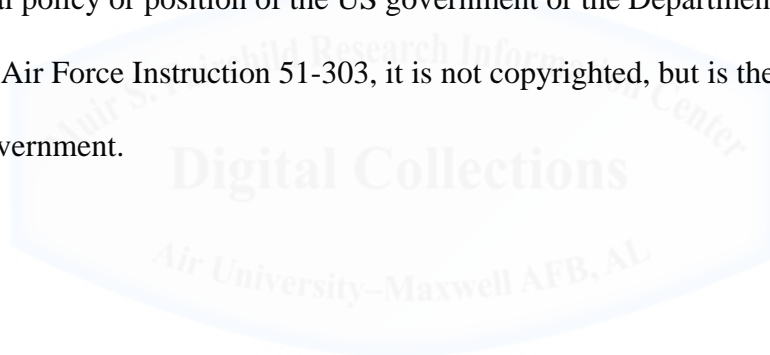
International orders emerge to mitigate the anarchic nature of international relations in order to promote stability, prosperity, and predictability for all member states. More so than realism or liberalism, constructivism provides the most comprehensive framework to explain how international orders form and why they change. International orders emerge at the end of major conflicts when nations with shared or accepted identities and shared ideas on international relations establish norms of behavior that will govern the newly established international order. These orders change when challenged by states or non-state actors who no longer believe in the identities or ideas that founded the international order and as a result no longer feel beholden to its norms. The usefulness of constructivism and limitations of realist and liberal theories of international relations are apparent in the norms established in three historical examples: the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the failure of the resulting international order to prevent the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and the disparity between the First and Second World War settlements.

Constructivism, as a comprehensive framework to explain how international orders form and why they change, does not exclude realist or liberal motivations but recognizes that additional forces may affect the structure of international relations and state behaviors. Constructivism agrees with the other theories that the basic nature of international relations is anarchic. It differs in that agents can shape this archaic character of international relations as they interact with each other resulting in a dynamic environment. Constructivism accounts for the impact of cultural identity, political ideas, and social norms. Therefore, agents of international relations within the constructivist viewpoint include communities, social groups, organizations, and states.[2] All of these agents have the ability to influence the structure of

international relations. Their identities, ideas, and norms of behavior help establish the rule sets

that international orders will follow.[3] The establishment of the Westphalian international order

in 1648 highlights how constructivist norms augment the realist approach of balancing power.

More than simply rebalancing a multi-polar European order, the Treaty of Westphalia in

1648 constructed new norms of a Westphalian international order, some of which are still in use

today. These norms developed based on shared identities amongst the belligerents and their

common ideas of European order. The Peace of Westphalia brought to an end the Thirty Years

War, one of Europe's most destructive conflicts and the last of its major religious wars.[4] As

absolute monarchs, each of the signatories to the treaty claimed their authority to rule from

divine right. The shared identity as royal monarchs and the plague of religious conflicts brought

them to the common idea that each kingdom had a right to sovereign control of its territory,

laying the groundwork for our modern concept of the state.[5] These shared identities and ideas

established the norms of behavior that governed the Westphalian international order: Each state

had a right to exist and govern its own territory free from foreign intervention.[6]

When conflicts arose in the Westphalian system, the shared norm of sovereignty ensured

they would be limited in scope. None of the conflicts in the Westphalian order threatened to

overthrow a sitting monarch or challenge the norm of state sovereignty. Conflicts under this

system according to Joseph Nye were "short, sharp, and geographically limited….states did not

have wars whose purpose was to rewrite the fundamental rules of the game. Put another way, it

was a very stable international system."[7] This offered stability, prosperity, and predictability to

the member states substituting the religious wars of the Middle Ages with limited colonial wars.

Changing social and political identities and ideas, not a balance of power shift, would challenge this Westphalian norm with revolutionary results.

When Enlightenment ideas challenged the premise of royal authority derived from divine right in favor of governance of the people, the identity and ideas underlining the Westphalian order were threatened.[8] This is the core of why international orders change and why constructivism can better address how these changes occur. The social theories of the Enlightenment founded the political concepts of republicanism and sparked the American and French Revolutions. The French Revolution injected republican ideas into European international relations and destroyed the stability provided by the Treaty of Westphalia. Republican ideas threatened the domestic power structure of European monarchies and undermined the legitimacy of monarchic state sovereignty.

Revolutionary France no longer identified socially or politically as an absolute monarchy. The revolutionary government believed in the republican idea of sovereignty derived from the people. Therefore, the sovereignty of its neighboring absolute monarchs eroded because they did not derive their governing power from the people. This resulted in France declaring it would aid foreign republican revolutions, a direct violation of Westphalian sovereignty and non-interference in domestic politics of another nation.[9] The republican idea threatened the international order because, according to Nye, France believed "that all monarchs should be sent to the gallows…and that power should emanate from the people."[10]

Realism fails to account for the impact of republican ideals on the Westphalian international order. Realists would argue the breakdown of the Westphalian system was due to Revolutionary France making an attempt at regional hegemony and the resulting wars were an

attempt to check this rise. Realists view international relations as unmitigated anarchy, which

requires states to defend themselves. This leads to a security dilemma where a balance of power

forms international orders. These systems manifest in hegemonic, bipolar, and multipolar

systems.[11] Europe in 1792 was a multipolar system; in order to maintain stability member states

were required to check rising powers to prevent regional hegemony. When examining the

French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars it is tempting to explain the conflict in purely realist

terms, particularly with the multiple coalitions created to balance out French power during the

Napoleonic Wars. This viewpoint ignores the actual balance-of-power stability in 1792.

During the road to war between France and Austria, there was no balance-of-power shift

to destabilize Europe, only a conflict of ideas and norms. In 1792, France completed their

Revolution by disposing King Louis XVI. The French Army poorly funded, manned, and

trained suffered from noble generals fleeing Revolutionary France and inexperienced troops

filling its ranks.[12] Their most prestigious general had resigned from the National Guard and

traveled home to retirement.[13] They posed no military or economic threat to the kingdoms of

Europe. The path to war formed not because France was preparing to make a run at regional

hegemony, but because the very idea that power did not belong to kings but to the people

threatened the ideas of the current international order. Austria and Prussia massed troops on the

French frontier and sought to restore the French monarchy, in other words to restore the norms of

the Westphalian order.[14]

Exclusively using the realist theory of balancing power is inadequate to explain the

breakdown of the Westphalian international order. Nye admits that realists "refer to changes like

the French Revolution as exogenous to a structural theory because they cannot be explained

inside the theory." [15] Constructivism is required to form a comprehensive understanding of the changes occurring in the international order. These changes continued throughout the 19th and early 20th Centuries as international orders attempted to form norms of behavior accounting for republicanism, nationalism, and other social movements, finally resulting in a strong constitutional international order in 1945.

The norms of the constitutional international order established in 1945 formed around the shared identity and ideas of liberal democracies. Liberalists claim that the resulting order had nothing to do with the constructivist notions of identity, ideas, and norms; but solely resulted from the economic, social, and political benefits of liberalism.[16] This is short sighted and incapable of justifying of how and why the post-WWII liberal democracies reacted differently than the post-WWI liberal democracies.

Liberalism suffers the same fate as realism with an inability to explain the changing nature of international orders, this is specifically apparent in the disparity between the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and the post-WWII settlements of 1945-1951. The Treaty of Versailles only lasted until 1939 and Europe was again on the path to World War. The Treaty of Versailles failed because while the identity of liberal democracies was established, the ideas that established the 1945 constitutional order and norms were not. In 1919, liberal democracies balanced war debts on the shoulders of Germany, halfheartedly supported the League of Nations, and retreated inward when faced with financial hardships and overseas aggression.[17] As they interacted with each other and the international system during the Great Depressions and WWII, they constructed a deeper and more complex understanding of international relations that surpassed limited realist and liberal viewpoints.[18]

It is not that they were more liberal or more democratic in 1945 than they were in 1919, but that in the intervening years liberal democracies were working toward avoiding the mistakes of 1919, resulting in deeper shared identities and ideas.[19] This ultimately strengthened constitutional ideas and norms. The result was the most expansive and inclusive post war settlement ever seen.[20] The United States and Europe led the establishment of institutions and agreements to deal with: war reconstruction and debts (Marshall Plan), open and regulate trade agreements (Bretton Woods), eliminate colonial and imperial holdings, provide for shared security (NATO), and establish truly international institutions in the hope of mitigating future conflict (United Nations).

The constitutional international order established in 1945 has proven remarkably stable, prosperous, and predictable. It successfully mitigated the anarchic Cold War relationship between the US and Soviet Union; two ideologically opposed nations who held more destructive power than any other point in human history. The constitutional order even provided the framework for these powers to seek common ground and work towards normalization and stability as shown by the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaties and other bilateral agreements. Realists and Liberalists would like to explain this stability as the ultimate nuclear balance of power or the power of free trade and capitalism, but constructivism continues to provide the more comprehensive view of how international orders form and why they change. Specifically its usefulness is apparent when explaining the norms established by the Treaty of Westphalia, the failure of the resulting international order to prevent the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and the disparity between the First and Second World War settlements.

Looking to the future with a constructivist eye, the constitutional order of 1945 is challenged, as was the Westphalian order in the 18th Century, by competing identities, ideas, and norms. While the Westphalian system faced republicanism and nationalism, the constitutional system faces globalism, jihadism, and nativism. Samuel Huntington would call this a clash of civilizations. Other scholars such as Nils Gilman attribute it to deviant globalization.[21] Whatever the true cause of these challenges, they are certainly rooted in changing identities, ideas, and norms that are interacting with the current international order and working to change it for the better or worse. How well the 1945 constitutional order endures will be dependent on its continued ability to construct, assimilate, and mitigate new identities, ideas, and norms as they appear.

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[1] I wish to thank Major Brian Hans and Major Joshua Wehrle for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found therein are my own.

[2] Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013), 70.

[3] Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffmann, "Making and Remaking the World for IR 101: A Resource for Teaching Social Constructivism in Introductory Classes," *International Studies Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2003): 15-33.

[4] Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*, 78.

[5] Ibid.

[6] John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 38.

[7] Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*, 80.

[8] James W. Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism." *American Political Thought*, Spring 2012, 13.

[9] D.G. Wright, *Revolution and Terror in France, 1789-1795* (London: Longman, 1992), 49.

[10] Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*, 80.

[11] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014), 33.

[12] Oliver Bernier, *Lafayette: Hero of Two Worlds* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton Inc., 1983), 235.

[13] Ibid.

[14] D.G. Wright, *Revolution and Terror in France,* 50.

[15] Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*, 80.

[16] Ibid., 64.

[17] Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. 33.

[18] Ibid.

[19] John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory*, 164.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Michael Mikaucic and Jacqueline Brewer, eds., *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2013), Chapter 1 "Deviant Globalization" by Nils Gilman, Jesse Goldhammer, and Steven Weber, 3.